Quaker Council for European Affairs

around europe

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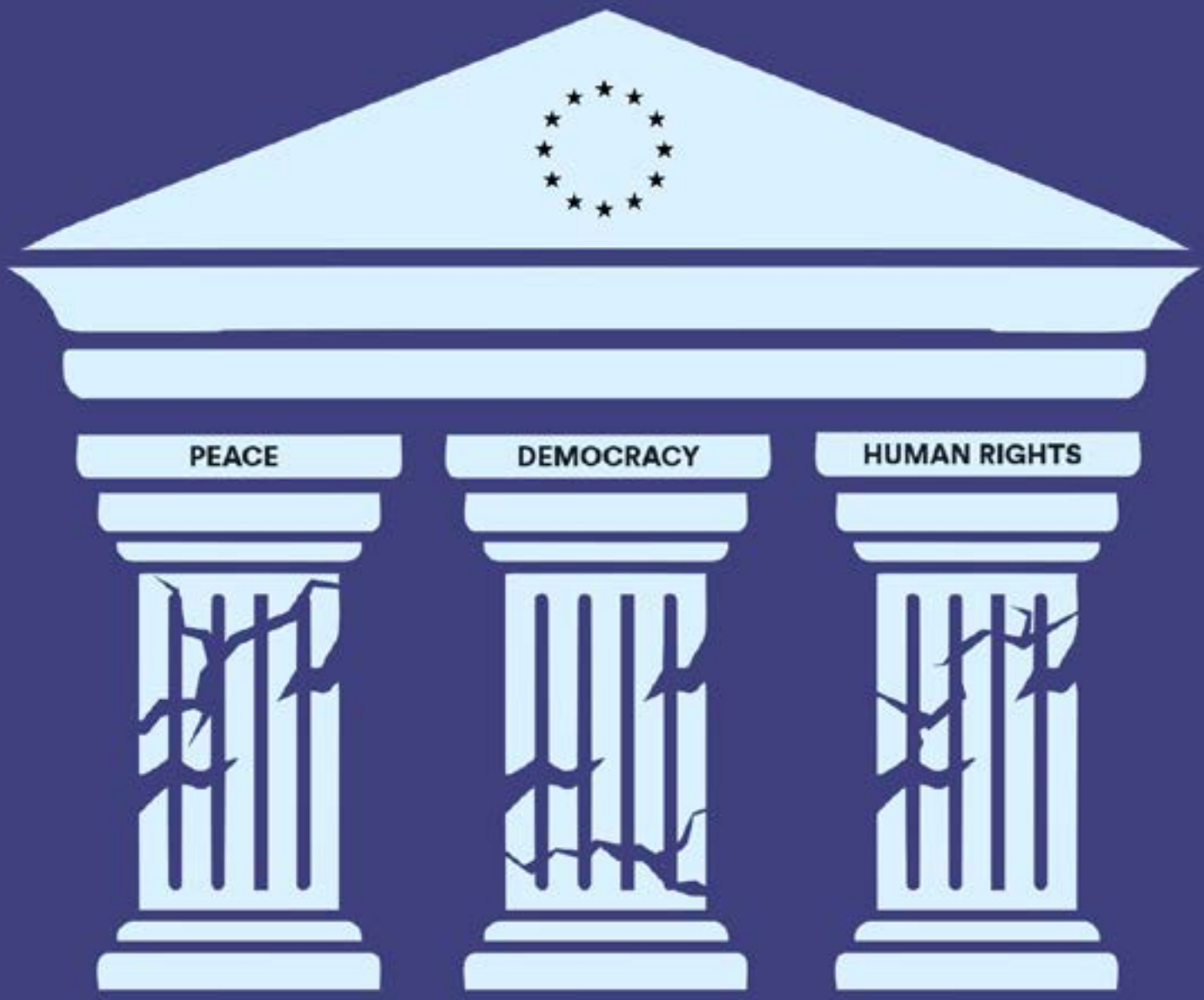
Is the EU Still a Peace Project?



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A word from the Director

Dear Friends,

Among the seven of us in Quaker House today, we have nine nationalities between us (three from outside the EU), and probably never would have met if it wasn't for the European Union. We're blessed to be able to work, laugh and enjoy life together, something many of our ancestors would never have imagined possible after the centuries of war and division on this continent. That makes it all the more difficult to put together this edition of Around Europe. Throughout its history, the incredibly successful peace project of the European Union has been filled with contradictions, but the current situation seems more critical than at any time since the Brexit vote a decade ago. While seeing the rapid decline of human rights and democracy in other countries, we feel the need to celebrate some of the many good things that the EU still does right. But our commitment to the universal ideals officially embraced by the EU also forces us to (lovingly) criticise the dangerous changes being made today.

Andrew de Sousa
QCEA Director

Welcome Marialaura!

Rethinking Security Officer

We are delighted to welcome Marialaura De Angelis as QCEA's new Rethinking Security Officer. Drawing on extensive experience in EU policy advocacy, international mediation support, and dialogue facilitation, she brings expertise in nuclear disarmament diplomacy, inclusive security governance, and sustainable peace frameworks. In this role, Marialaura will help advance a more comprehensive, inclusive, and sustainable vision of security in Europe, rooted in the principles of peace, justice, and equality.

A geopolitical analyst specialising in the Asia-Pacific region, Marialaura has over twenty years of experience working on US and EU policies, strategies, and engagement in the region across the EU institutions, private sector, international think tanks, and the NGO sector. She has always been a passionate advocate for peaceful conflict resolution and has been involved in mediation and dialogue facilitation initiatives across the region since 2008,

working alongside some of the world's leading experts in negotiation and diplomacy.
Outside of work, Marialaura loves travelling and enjoys learning new languages and discovering different cultures and perspectives. She speaks Italian, English, and French, and has varying degrees of proficiency in Spanish, Japanese, and Korean. She loves reading novels, watching films, dancing, and wandering around with her camera, taking photographs.

Is the EU Still a Peace Project?

Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty defines the European Union's aim as "to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples," ensuring a society in which pluralism, tolerance, justice, solidarity, non-discrimination and equality prevail. It also commits the EU to promoting these values abroad, including peace, democracy and human rights, while contributing to an international community based on respect for international law and mutual respect among peoples. Looking at EU policies and official narratives today, however, it seems that the Union has forgotten these aims and lost sight of its values.

In 1950, amid the devastation of the Second World War, the European project began as a peace project, founded on the conviction that cooperation and economic interdependence could prevent conflict and create shared prosperity, making another war in Europe "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible." Over time, it developed into a more ambitious political and economic partnership, in which a common commitment to the values enshrined in its treaties became the guiding framework for the kind of global actor Europe aspired to become and the vision it sought to project abroad.

By the end of the twentieth century, the EU was developing beyond a peace project into an embodiment of postwar internationalism: a postmodern political project rejecting rigid borders, military dominance and absolute sovereignty. Instead, it promoted soft power, peacebuilding and respect for international law, while multilateral diplomacy and interdependence became instruments of foreign policy, conflict resolution and security. For decades, the EU was regarded as a leader of universal human rights, social justice and democratic civil rights.

However, with the far right rising across EU member states and increasingly shaping EU institutions and policies, the ideologies that once brought war and catastrophe to Europe have returned, bringing Europe back towards the authoritarian, militaristic and fragmented Europe of nation-states that the EU project sought to transcend.

As a result, European countries are responding to the current geopolitical polycrisis by moving away from the vision of an enlightened, postmodern, pacifist and integrated EU. Rearmament and militarised responses are prioritised at the expense of peacebuilding, social and economic well-being, democracy, human rights, rule of law, environmental sustainability and climate action. Across Europe, nationalist ideologies are influencing political decision-making, leading to the introduction of anti-immigration and anti-minority policies, as well as measures that restrict citizens' civil rights.

On institutional websites and in official speeches, EU aims and values continue to be proclaimed. But do they still have substantive meaning, or have they become empty words? Is the EU abandoning its path towards postmodernity and its aspiration to global leadership, surrendering instead to the old geopolitical logic of hard power and national rivalry, and following other global actors down a path it was created to transcend?

New Publication!

Voices of Peace:

Stories of Conscientious Objectors from Europe and Beyond.

On 15 May, we launched a storytelling publication, Voices of Peace: Stories of Conscientious Objectors from Europe and Beyond. The project was a joint effort with Connection e.V., War Resisters' International (WRI) and Agir Pour La Paix.

While the world is growing more militarised, and security is increasingly framed in terms of force, there are still many people who refuse to be part of this machinery and choose to say "no" to the cycle of violence.

The publication shares personal stories from people in eight countries (Belgium, Greece, Eritrea, Türkiye, Israel, Finland, Russia, and Spain) who, in different ways, decided to reject military service and violence.

Our publication aims to amplify the voices of those who made such a decision. We interviewed each person not only about their decision to become a conscientious objector but also about themselves, their passions and their life plans. We ended the publication asking them about their plans for the future. Every contributor tells a different story. We spoke to people such as Spanish artists, a Russian human rights activist, and refugees from Eritrea, each bringing their own motivation for refusing military service. Some, like Alexander from Russia, tried to leave the armed forces after already enlisting. Others, like Miro, were total objectors who refused even alternative service, viewing it as punitive. Some had escaped compulsory service of indefinite duration, as in Eritrea. Others still, such as Ayana from Israel, and Roman from Russia, opposed military service because of their country's actions. Between them, each offers a unique approach to the notion of conscientious objection. One does not always have to be an idealistic, pacifist activist (although we interviewed those as well) - it is enough if someone decided to join the military and changed their mind later, or simply refused because they did not want to kill or be killed.

Thanks to Friends in the Netherlands, the publication is also available in Dutch.

We welcome you to read their stories and listen to their voices.

Read *Voices of Peace* online at:

(ENG) https://www.qcea.org/voices-of-peace-stories-of-conscientious-objectors-from-europe-and-beyond/

(NL) https://www.qcea.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/Voices-of-Peace-NL-1.pdf

Ceuta

Putting People at the Centre of Europe's Migration Response

On 30 July, an estimated 72,000 people attempted to enter the Spanish enclave of Ceuta from Morocco, many swimming around the border or crossing by water. At least 80 people died, while thousands returned to Morocco shortly afterwards. The movement appears to have been triggered in part by online misinformation that the border was open, although questions remain about the role of Moroccan border controls and the political context.

The scale of the movement has prompted political debate about border security, Morocco-Spain relations and the possibility that the crossing was deliberately encouraged or amplified. While online networks clearly played a role in spreading information and encouraging movement, it is important not to reduce those who crossed to a "mob" or assume that they were simply acting as instruments of another government in a coordinated "invasion". Behind the numbers were individuals making decisions about their own futures, often in circumstances shaped by limited opportunities, insecurity and a lack of safe ways to move.

For QCEA, this distinction matters. When migration is primarily framed as a security challenge, the people moving can disappear from the conversation. The EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, now entering implementation, risks reinforcing this tendency. The Pact places significant emphasis on strengthening external borders, preventing people from reaching EU territory and increasing cooperation with countries outside the EU to manage migration. These measures may reduce some arrivals in the short term, but they do not address why people move and can push people towards more dangerous routes when safer options are unavailable.

This is what we mean when we speak of deterrence: policies intended to discourage people from coming to Europe, often through stricter border controls or the threat of return, means shifting part of Europe's migration management beyond EU borders, including through cooperation with countries of origin and transit.

Europe needs to complement migration management with a positive peace approach. This means investing in human security: addressing conflict, inequality and insecurity that contribute to displacement; expanding safe and regular pathways through which people can travel without relying on dangerous journeys; and building partnerships with countries outside Europe based on shared responsibility, rights and long-term stability.

The EU should use the lessons of Ceuta not simply to strengthen borders, but to ask a more fundamental question: what would a migration system look like if the safety, dignity and agency of people on the move were at its centre?

A humane migration policy must make dangerous journeys less necessary, not simply more difficult.

Never Again:

What We Lose When We Forget the Human Face of War

On 6 August, Quaker House Brussels hosted a gathering to commemorate the victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In a silent circle, before lighting lanterns in their honour, participants read testimonies from Hibakusha – survivors of the atomic bombings – recounting what happened that day, how the bombings affected their lives, and how their consequences shaped those of their children and grandchildren.

When listening to real stories of what happened to people that day, the profound irrationality of nuclear deterrence becomes clear. Cognitive science shows how abstract language can normalise the risks of nuclear warfare. Our brains are not designed to imagine the loss of so many lives at once, so the consequences of nuclear weapons remain abstract, making it possible to discuss them as rational and manageable instruments of security. But when we hear survivors' stories and put human faces to the consequences, our imagination can grasp what those weapons actually mean. The abstract becomes real. A debate on nuclear deterrence immediately after listening to Hibakusha testimonies would seem illogical and completely unacceptable.

The same happens with conventional warfare. In Italy, until the 1990s, children were often asked to interview their grandparents as part of their history homework when studying the Second World War. The exercise was intended to give generations born into peace and democracy a more direct understanding of what war actually means, through the words of the ones who lived it.

When memory is lost, so too can the lessons that history offers – and that is when we risk repeating past mistakes. Europe has now largely lost the generation that lived through the war. Without their testimonies of its everyday reality, military conflict can once again be discussed through abstract language and narratives that shape it in our minds, not as the collective trauma and catastrophe it is, and takes decades and generations to overcome, but as a normalised, acceptable or even desirable instrument of foreign policy.

What would those grandparents say if they could see neo-Nazi and neo-fascist politicians in parliament advocating rearmament and preparations for war; a genocide being allowed to continue in full view of the world, livestreamed in real time; the construction of camps to remove minorities; and the development of autonomous and remotely operated drones that allow war to be waged without even seeing whom we are killing? Testimonies from civilians and soldiers recounting the horrors of war should be heard before political meetings on defence and security. Policymakers should be confronted not only with strategic assessments, threat analyses and military capabilities, but also with the human reality of their decisions. If we want to build peace, we must ensure that we never forget what war actually means.

Disinformation About Migrants

Ceuta & Poland

While the rapid development of media has given many people opportunities to gather information and communicate, it has also brought the risk that the messages we consume or produce may be distorted, manipulated, or deliberately falsified. One of the most dangerous phenomena linked to this issue is disinformation. Disinformation is the malicious, deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information. It should not be confused with misinformation, which often conveys false information without malicious intent.

According to **Debunk.org** (an independent technology think tank and NGO from Lithuania), disinformation often relies on rhetorical techniques such as selection (presenting only the facts that suit a particular narrative), hyperbolisation (exaggerating facts), and forgery (presenting fabricated evidence as genuine).

Disinformation is a prominent topic in the European debate. According to the **European Commission**, disinformation and foreign information manipulation are a serious threat to societies, as they can undermine democratic institutions and processes, such as elections, by preventing people from making informed decisions or discouraging them from voting. It is often linked to security issues; however, there are also voices that address its detrimental effect on peace. The **Berghof Foundation** describes disinformation as a global challenge that undermines trust, social cohesion, and peace, and proposes dialogue, storytelling, and reconciliation programmes to address it.

Disinformation is increasingly linked with current geopolitical events.

For example, Poland was recently shaken by a wave of violent attacks against Ukrainians in several Polish cities. Many factors were at play, but one was the spread of hostile, negative content targeting Ukrainians online. According to a 2026 **analysis** by the Casimir Pułaski Foundation of Polish social media and online content, dominant narratives portrayed Ukrainians as a threat to Polish historical memory and national identity, warned of an alleged "Ukrainisation" of Poland, and framed illegal migration as a threat to state security.

Another case was that of Ceuta- the small Spanish enclave in Africa where, over two days at the end of July 2026, more than 72,000 migrants crossed irregularly from Morocco, with at least 80 people dying in the attempt, according to local authorities. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez **said** social networks linked to Israel and Russia had spread disinformation about the crisis, including posts falsely claiming that migrants arriving by sea would automatically be allowed to remain in Spain.

While neither crisis was caused solely by disinformation, both show how discourse about disinformation increasingly accompanies major political events.

All in all, disinformation seems to be on the rise, accompanying more and more social & political events.

As an organisation grounded in Quaker values, our Testimony of Integrity means we must address this issue as part of our 'Speaking Truth to Power in a Crisis of Democracy' programme. We will focus on bringing a peacebuilding lens to disinformation and addressing it through dialogue. Want to know more?

Stay tuned as we develop this programme!

Stop ReArm Europe:

Acting for a Peace Project

On 4 March 2025, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, presented the 'Re-Arm Europe' plan (later renamed, somewhat euphemistically, 'Readiness 2030'), calling for at least €800 billion additional military spending over the next four years; representing an increase of nearly 60% compared with 2024, when the collective defence spending of all 27 Member States was already €343 billion.

A few days later, a handful of civil society organisations, including Transform!Europe, the International Peace Bureau and the Transnational Institute, launched the 'Stop ReArm Europe' appeal, convinced that action was needed in the face of this accelerating militarisation of Europe, without really knowing where this initiative would lead.

Fifteen months later, on 14 June 2026, over 10,000 people marched through the streets of Brussels to say 'no' to the significant increase in military spending at the expense of the fight against climate change and the welfare state, amongst other things. This demonstration was a success thanks to the support of many trade unions, but also to the commitment of the hundreds of organisations across Europe that had signed the 'Stop ReArm Europe' appeal, representing a wide range of social organisations, youth, peace, feminist and anti-racist movements.

A major strength of the Stop ReArm Europe campaign is its members' diversity in priorities, resources and methods of action. Members come together around a common cause without seeking to standardise approaches, but to promote existing actions, connect struggles and actors, and foster new local and European initiatives.

The next two major actions planned reflect this approach:

- The Global Week of Action for Peace and Climate Justice, launched in 2024 by researchers and activists working on the militarisation of the climate crisis, offers a wide range of webinars, publications, demonstrations and other activities around the world. It will take place from 21-29 September: https://climatemilitarism.org/weekofaction.
- A wide coalition of European student and youth organisations is calling for a day of joint strike and mobilisation on 20 November under the slogan "fight for our future, not their wars" (https://youthstrike.org). Stop ReArm Europe calls for other movements to show their support for the youth from 20-22 November.

- Laëtitia Sédou
EU Programme Officer, ENAAT

Want to know more?

Visit European Network Against the Arms Trade's new website (https://enaat.org/).

Ukraine:

Extending Protection, but Not for Everyone

In July, the European Union extended temporary protection for people fleeing Russia's war in Ukraine until March 2028, providing continued legal certainty for millions of displaced people. However, the proposal introduces a significant limitation: newly arriving Ukrainian men of conscription age will be excluded unless they can prove they have complied with military service obligations.

This raises particular concerns for conscientious objectors. In Ukraine's accession process, the EU has correctly criticised the lack of alternative service for Ukrainian Conscientious Objectors as contrary to human rights standards. Excluding people from protection because of their military status contradicts the EU's own commitment to human rights. It risks leaving some displaced people without a clear legal pathway to safety, despite the ongoing war.

For QCEA, protection from war should not depend on a person's willingness to participate in it. Conscientious objection is a human right, protected under EU and international standards. The principle of non-discrimination is central to international human rights and refugee law; requiring military service is not.

Sojourner Truth House

While European governments pursue fortress mentality approaches to migration, many people across the continent continue to believe that we can do better, and are working to treat people on the move with dignity and respect. To this effect, young Friends have founded the Sojourner Truth House in late 2025 in Calais, France.

Calais has been experiencing a humanitarian crisis, with tens of thousands of people every year trying to cross the English Channel by small boat to reach the UK. A lack of government support means the majority of these people stay in makeshift camps, with police brutality and mass evictions occurring frequently.

The Sojourner Truth House is named after an escaped slave who was heavily involved in the U.S. Underground Railroad in the 19th century. In keeping with this spirit of helping people on the move, this house of hospitality aims to provide an alternative safe space for women and children in Calais, fostering community through sharing, cooking communally and group worship.

To find out more about the initiative and how you can help visit https://www.quakersolidaritycentre.org

Interview with Jeremy Lester

Former EU Ambassador

*Citizens across Europe have been demanding their national governments and the EU put pressure on the Israeli Government to end the genocide in Gaza. Those speaking up include current civil servants and former officials. QCEA spoke with **Jeremy Lester**, a retired EU Ambassador and Quaker, about why EU institutions are failing to fulfil human rights obligations and what gives him hope that the situation can get better.*

QCEA: It is rare to see former diplomats speaking so regularly and consistently on an issue. Tell us about the group and why you are doing this.

JL: It began with just a very small number of people signing a letter, convinced that the European Union should live up to its values. There are now over four hundred former EU and EU member state ambassadors and senior officials who have signed our demands. See for instance the May 2026 statement.

I think we're all motivated by a sense of the gross injustice of what is going on in Israel-Palestine, and a hurt, a disappointment, that the institutions for which we have devoted most of our professional lives are not living up to the standards which we would like them to.

QCEA: What do you think has been accomplished by this group and the larger movement?

JL: I do think that the European Commission, which is the implementer and guardian of that which is decided by the European Union through its member states, could be more courageous in its oversight. For instance, there's the EU's partnership agreement with Israel, which provides a mutual commitment to the respect for human rights. This is just a personal, not a lawyer's, opinion - but it seems to me that if there is flagrant disregard for human rights by one party, then the Commission, as the implementer of that partnership agreement, should take on its own responsibility - at least provisionally suspending some aspects, rather than depending on unanimity of Member States to apply it.

A broad brush interpretation would be that we've got nowhere, and nor has the street. There seems to be a profound disconnect between how most people are now recognising that a long ongoing genocide is occurring and that international human rights and criminal law are not being observed, and yet our governments, by and large, are not listening.

When an issue goes on for months and then years, it's very difficult for it to keep public and political attention. One of the things we have been able to do is to keep it on the agenda.

↑ CREDIT: CANVA

I think we should go on addressing EU governments and the European Union. We should be looking at our own behaviour, in terms of our buying and investment policy. Every time in a supermarket, you can check whether the dates come from Palestine or from Israel, put a sticker saying "don't buy genocide-supporting goods," things like that. The BDS campaign - boycott, disinvest, sanctions - is something individuals, local authorities, as well as governments, can do in that respect.

And another thing: I fight against this outrageous

amalgam, pushed largely by Israel, that to criticise Israel is to be anti-Semitic. We can be passionately against all forms of racism, and being anti-Semitic is, to my mind, just one form of racism, and shouldn't be singled out such that any criticism of Israel, or what goes on in the occupied territories, is seen as anti-Semitic.

QCEA: And what about EU external policies more generally, why did you devote such a significant part of your life to it?

JL: I have a conviction that human beings have a capacity to develop, for good or for less good. And so it's up to all of us to strive to bring out that which is best in humanity. This is not just a personal quest, but one which doesn't allow for a discontinuity between religious belief and political action. It's part of one's life.

Why did I first decide to work for the European Union? Because, under the Commissioner for Development a very long time ago, there was the aspiration that the Lomé Convention would be a prototype of a new relationship between what had been the colonisers and the colonised, that we were envisioning equal partnership, about their decision-making rather than our imposition.

↑ CREDIT: CANVA

↑ CREDIT: CANVA

And while the dialogue between partners, as we now call them, has changed, and it has become more focused on European Union needs and interests, it remains a good framework for talking in a way which goes beyond that of just a former colonial member, a colonising power, with a weak African partner.

Having worked nearly forty years for the EU, I still have huge hopes. While wars are taking place on Europe's frontiers, there are no wars within; when there's a domestic conflict, it is resolved in conference rooms rather than by picking up arms. I hope it can be a model for the rest of the world.

Read the Statement by Former Diplomats.

Read the statement made in May 2026: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sYaBV87mGk00joqOoF08CS0dfDiQ4454/view?usp=sharing

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Important Update about Around Europe 401

We apologise to anyone whose print copy of Around Europe 401 was not delivered because of the postal strike in Belgium. The issue is available on our webpage, but if you would like us to send a replacement print copy, please email office@qcea.org.

around europe

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